

## General Idea retrospective displays their self-parodying camp

By HENRY SUM

"We wanted to be famous; we wanted to be glamorous; we wanted to be rich. That is to say, we wanted to be artists, and we knew that if we were famous, if we were glamorous, we could say, we are artists, and we would be. We did and we are. We are famous, glamorous artists."

These were the words of A. A. Bronson, one of the three members of General Idea (GI) at the opening ceremonies of their current retrospective "The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion" at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Mr. Bronson's words suggest that GI's quest for fame supersedes their artistic ambition. Unquestionably their work has style, but it's an affected, self-parodying style so confident that it doesn't even bother to mask its lack of content. In the context of "camp" sensibility, the show exhibits a high degree of artifice and stylization. What it lacks in content, it tries to make up for in clever, superficial forms.

Their notion of the Pavilion as "a framing device for accommodation" is best expressed in their Consumer "Boutique" and "Colour Bar

Lounge." Both pieces display the trio's obsession with campy science-fiction, fascist paranoia and media hype. The Boutique is a tacky, galvanized sheet metal and plexiglass "bar-like" construction that exhibits some pretty tasteless postcards, plexiglass dollar signs, test tubes and "cocktail palettes." Back issues of GI's own magazine, FILE, are on display at the Boutique, and are characteristically top-heavy with amorphous double-talk and esoteric jargon, and full of futuristic proposals juxtaposed against enlargements of photographs from old commercial magazines. It is just such a source that spawned one of the alienating images in the Colour Bar Lounge.

The illustration depicts a bartender mixing drinks from a long line of graduated, cylindrical pumps while businessmen isolated in adjacent booths quaff back shot glasses. Adopting the idea for their Colour Bar Lounge, GI positions a glamorous-looking model who sits forward in a narrow black compartment, isolated from her neighboring bar-mates and casually sipping a drink out of a pyrex test tube. The

scene looks at once glamorously chic and menacingly alienating.

Ambiguity is as important to GI's creativity as construction and destruction is to the myth of their Pavillion. In the "Room of the Unknown Function" for example, there are seven black pillasters recessed in space. Three-quarters of the way up each pillaster is a square plexi-glass encasement containing what appear to be rotating ceramic dildos. GI refers to these objects as "cornicopias," though they're much too phallic looking to resemble the horn-of-plenty. Eerie, tribal drumming emanates from small speakers hidden in the pillasters and a woman's voice intermittently recites obscure GI aphorisms, such as "the cornucopia excretes objets d'art as the leopard poodle sheds its spots."

The poodle's effete, banal image is a symbol for the patronizing rich and also a trademark for GI itself. The poodles find themselves in unlikely settings—in eerie sci-fi landscapes, in astrological constellations, within arrangements of phony archaeological paintings,

reliefs and ceramic fragments. One series positions three of the fluffy hounds opposite three enormous canvases which are marked by gigantic Xs. Normally a sign of revolution these Xs are painted in gay, ineffectual ultramarine blue.

This final poodle series follows the most inconsistent artifact in the entire show—an acrylic painting entitled "Atomic Blast" depicting a mushroom cloud. Done in the meticulous pointillistic style of George Seurat, the shock waves of the blast radiate beyond the canvas and into the picture frame itself. By including this incongruous piece before the canine orgy series, GI seems to be implying that all the wretched excess of their artwork and of the society they live in is doomed to be destroyed and that our only resource in term is not General Idea but general copulation.

Currently on view at the Art Gallery of Ontario until June 23, the show is an extensive collection of the three-man collective's work over the past 17 years and should provide a good introduction to those unfamiliar with the troupe's work.

## Young and fresh talent deliver tension in revival of classic Herbert drama

By ALEX PATTERSON

So successful was the recent revival of *Fortune And Men's Eyes* that it was revived again; after its initial run in April, it came back for a longer run in May at a larger venue. John Herbert's certified Canadian classic about life in prison is enjoying a new popularity in its own country which once scorned it.

*Fortune and Men's Eyes* (not *Fortune IN Men's Eyes*, as it is often called) is an ideal choice for the fledgling Eclectic Theater Productions; it needs only one set, five actors, and it lends itself to talent that is young and fresh. The director and four fifths of the players are from York's undergraduate Theater department, although the sold-out run took place downtown at Tarragon's Extra Space.

The author took the title from Shakespeare's Sonnet XXIX: *When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes / I, all alone, beweep my outcast state, / And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, / And look upon myself, and curse my fate . . .*

These hapless convicts are indeed in disgrace with Fortune: "Mona Lisa" has been framed for making sexual advances to some thugs who had actually been robbing him when the police arrived, and "Smitty" was turned in by his own father. As for the part about Men's Eyes, well . . . The play's frankness in dealing with prison homosexuality is legendary, having been boycotted in Canada for seven years (after a successful off-

Broadway run in 1967) and has been in trouble with our Censor Board.

When the film version was released in 1972 it was promoted with the slogan "What goes on in prison is a crime." The statement, though exploitative like the film itself, was factually correct, since homosexuality was still against the law in 45 out of 50 states. The studio was under the impression that gays were going to be the Next Big Thing at the box office.

Returning to the original script Herbert wrote for the stage—a superior and more satisfying piece of writing—director Jordan Merkur wanted to tone down the sensationalistic aspects of the movie, the better to concentrate on characterization and the theme of loss of innocence. He has downplayed the peep-show qualities of the film, but there is still violence aplenty as the four cons and their guard threaten, bully, kick, slap, throttle, and rape each other. The production is an orgy of unofficial corporal punishment from the moment the new inmate, Smith (Kirk Dunn), is thrown face-first into the cell by "Holy Face," the "screw" (Jack Zimmerman), right through to its thoroughly depressing conclusion.

This atmosphere of gloom is aided and abetted by Mary Spryakis' claustrophobic set. The walls of the grimly realistic cell are stretched canvas, which, unfortunately, shakes during some of the more rowdy episodes. This would be a minor point hardly worth mentioning had this not been a play where

realism is everything.

Realism is abundant in Mark Cowling's portrayal of the vicious repeat offender "Rocky." Cowling has had two months behind bars himself as part of his training, and it pays off in a performance of frightening verisimilitude. "Rocky" is an arrogant, sadistic pimp who uses sex as a weapon to control and intimidate others, and Cowling brings out all of the character's ugliness. Director Merkur has presented him in constant animation: strutting, boasting, striking street corner attitudes, which put him in stark contrast with the naive Smith and the retiring, sweet-natured "Mona" (Rolf Reynolds).

Keeping the tension high is the fourth con, the outlandish "Queenie," in a superb performance by Maurice Wint. "Queenie" is written as the kind of fussy, campy, preening homosexual that would have 1980s audiences screaming "stereotype!" had Wint not imbued his portrayal with dignity. When playing this self-described "mean bitch," the constant clowning and impersonations of Mae West and Bette Davis demand certain excesses, but it is to this young actor's credit that "she" doesn't become a walking cliché.

Despite a few problems inevitable for a new company, ETP has done an admirable job of communicating the essential truths of Herbert's work: they have shown with painful accuracy the side of prison life not found in such rubbish as *Jailhouse Rock* or *1000 Convicts And A Woman*, which are an insult to anyone who has ever served time.

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